

The Simple Things in Life: **Rediscover Them in the Fall of 2001**

By Randy Kreil
Photos by Craig Bihhle



As I stood in the prairie thicket, perspiration dripped steadily off my forehead. The July sky was blue and clear and the temperature was hot even though it was approaching 8 p.m. The Juneberry patch we discovered a day earlier was more lush with fruit than we thought. The berries were plump and juicy and the picking was easy. My fingers were stained a deep purple, and I speculated, so were my tongue and lips.

It occurred to me as I was working my way through the thicket, like some hungry bear in the north woods, how many years had passed since I had been berry picking. I thought about how much I missed the simple work of harvesting some of nature's fruit and how good that pie would be tomorrow. Berry picking wasn't something we had made time for lately and probably wouldn't have even thought about until we stumbled across the plentiful patch while taking Ally, our new Lab puppy, for her first swim.

While standing in that Juneberry thicket I thought about simple things that add so much enjoyment to life. Watching a new pup learn to swim and picking berries are just two examples of the countless, seemingly mundane activities that have special meaning to people who hunt, fish, and spend time outdoors.

In today's world many are overwhelmed by increased activity in all aspects of life. This trend includes those of us who appreciate and live for time in the outdoors. It's becoming more difficult to find or make time to engage in outdoor activities as often as we would like.

The world of hunting is also going through some monumental changes. These changes are just beginning to change the face of hunting in North Dakota. Resident versus nonresident issues, fee hunting, guiding and outfitting, leasing exclusive rights to hunting areas, and outright purchase of the best tracts by wealthy in-state and out-of-state buyers are some of the changes receiving the most attention. But other factors are also at play. The advent of outdoor television networks and the explosion of hunting and angling magazines, internet web sites, and rapidly advancing technology in weapons, vehicles, clothing, and specialized outdoor equipment all contribute to a sense that you have to "hurry up and get 'em before the game hogs do."

Some days I think hunting has turned into some sort of bizarre race toward getting exclusive access to the best hunting spots at any cost, bagging the fastest limit, bringing home the biggest antlers, finding the turkey with the longest beard, driving the fanciest SUV, and having

more technologically advanced equipment than the other guy. It's like those of us in the hunting community have lost the basic feeling in our souls for what makes hunting special. Instead we seem to be contestants in one of those awful, mindless, and greed-inspiring television reality shows.

Having these thoughts while picking berries may be a pathetic insight into my own mind; however, it's a perfect example of how easy it is to lose sight of what is really important. Then and there, in that berry patch I decided that it's time to make sure the simple things do not

escape from my life. I challenge you to do the same in the fall of 2001. Life is too short to not enjoy those things not sold on television between yet another turkey hunting video and the guided canned hunt made to look like some sort of pristine safari.

This article will preview each of the major 2001 hunting seasons. In each case I have included one of the simple things that make each season special to me. Everyone who participates in these seasons has their own traditions and memories of something basic and simple that makes hunting something special.

Upland Game Birds



SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

One of my favorite things about living in North Dakota is the opportunity to walk native prairie in search of sharp-tailed grouse. Few places in the world offer this kind of experience. The beauty of autumn colors on the prairie is more subtle than a New England forest, but against a bright blue sky on a warm September afternoon the prairie is spectacular if you take the time to notice. This is especially true if you are carrying a shotgun and your dog is working buffalo berry patches, little bluestem and coneflower-covered hillsides for sharp-tails.

Last fall hunters in North Dakota harvested just over 125,000 sharp-tailed grouse, up from 101,564 in 1999. There were 33,573 people in the field after sharptails last year and the average bag was 3.72 birds per hunter, both up slightly from 1999. The downside to last year's harvest was the age ratio, calculated from hunter wing data. The ratio was the lowest since 1993 and far below what the population needs to maintain itself over time. Jerry Kobriger, the Department's upland game supervisor, predicted a lower spring population based on the low age ratio and this spring's field surveys confirmed his suspicions. Decreases in spring counts occurred in nearly all areas of the state. Especially hard hit were the southwest and badlands. This information, combined with stormy, wet weather in June is reason for concern. Once late summer roadside brood surveys are completed we will have a better idea of what to expect for the fall hunting season.

HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE

This popular game bird is slowly recovering from multiple weather-related disasters of the 1990s. Hard winters and cold, wet brood-rearing periods contributed to the demise of the partridge in North Dakota. In the fall of 2000, hunters bagged nearly 51,000 partridge, up from just over 41,000 in 1999. The counties with the highest partridge harvest included Morton, Hettinger, Stark, and Stutsman. As with the other upland game birds, the late summer brood surveys will give us a better indication of what to expect in the fall of 2001. At this point, if the wet weather in June didn't substantially reduce reproductive success then we anticipate partridge will continue their gradual recovery.

Left: Sharptail populations are down a bit in 2001, but hunters will still find plenty of opportunities. Right: More hunters pursue pheasants than any other upland game bird. With a positive pheasant season outlook this year, that trend will likely continue.

RING-NECKED PHEASANTS

The most fun aspect of pheasant hunting for me and probably many others is hunting with a good dog. Whether it's a well-trained pointer or a hardworking flusher, few things related to hunting are more enjoyable than watching a good dog work a wily rooster. The pure energy and excitement of a dog finding a bird in thick cover is matched only by the rush of adrenalin the hunter gets as the cackling rooster flushes. It always amazes me how a tired dog and equally tired hunter can find an extra burst of energy late in the day when the dog crosses a fresh scent.

Pheasant hunters killed 283,759 roosters in the fall of 2000, an increase of nearly 10 percent over 1999. Thirteen percent more people hunted pheasants, including both residents and nonresidents. The number of resident hunters rose from 47,609 to 52,651 and nonresident hunters increased from 11,857 to 14,525. The leading counties for pheasant harvest in 2000 were, in order: Hettinger, Morton, Grant, Stark, Burleigh, Emmons, and Mercer.



This spring's crowing counts indicated a statewide population increase of between 25 and 30 percent. This is the fourth year in a row, since the devastating winter of 1996-1997, that spring pheasant populations have increased. The only downside to the pheasant outlook is in the northwest corner of the state, where counts were down after another winter that arrived early and stayed late. At this time Lowell Tripp, longtime pheasant biologist for the Department, expects a fair to good fall hunting season depending on the impact of wet weather on reproductive success.

RUFFED GROUSE AND SAGE GROUSE

In our state we are fortunate to have the opportunity to hunt both ruffed grouse and sage grouse. Few states can claim that distinction. A walk in the woods in mid-October is a special experience. It's not just that North Dakota has fewer acres of natural forest than any other state that makes the visit special, but it's the thrill of hunting the elusive ruffed grouse and the quiet of the woods. The smell of aspen is special to me. The aroma of the

deep woods conjures fond memories of past hunts and days tagging along with my father as he worked in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills. These were his favorite places on earth and they remain some of mine today.

Ruffed grouse and sage grouse have limited harvests. Last year sage grouse harvest was up and ruffed grouse harvest was down. Spring of 2001 sage grouse counts indicated a decrease in males on the strutting grounds. The good news is that even with the decrease the counts were still higher than the seven-year average. Along the northern border of the state, ruffed grouse counts were down which will likely mean lower harvests this fall.

COTTONTAILS AND TREE SQUIRRELS

While we're on the subject of enjoying the simple things, when was the last time you actually hunted cottontails or squirrels? Most of us hunted for them when we were young and just starting

to understand the feelings that drove us to pick up a .22 and go in search of rabbits and squirrels. Did you realize that in 2000 only 4,700 people hunted cottontails in North Dakota? Even fewer, 2,500, pursued tree squirrels. Do you remember how tasty cottontails and squirrels can be? I remember, and plan to make a concerted effort to change the fact I haven't hunted either of these species in more than a decade. Just for your information, Richland and Grand Forks counties lead the state in both cottontail and tree squirrel harvest.

WILD TURKEY

A few years back I hunted turkeys in the Killdeer Mountains. It was a mid-October day and I left Bismarck well before dawn. After arriving, I covered several miles and did not see a turkey within 500 yards. After eating a lunch carried in my game vest, I nestled into a sunny native prairie hillside out of the wind and proceeded to take the best nap of my life.

You have all been there at some time or another, whether it's goose hunting, sitting in a tree stand, or even taking a break from a pheasant hunt. An early morning, some vigorous exercise, a good lunch, and the warm sun all lend themselves to a peaceful and restful midday siesta. A simple thing in life that leaves you relaxed and refreshed. Try it sometime.

Fall turkey hunting opportunities in North Dakota continue to expand along with the number of people interested in participating. Last year the Department eliminated the early and late turkey seasons in favor of one long season. The change was intended to increase opportunity to harvest a turkey.

The change was well received, with almost 2,000 more applicants for licenses, a 30 percent increase from 1999. Hunter success in 2000 was 65 percent and both hunters and landowners responded positively to the change in season structure. With the season running into early January, landowners who were having turkey depredation problems had the chance to invite hunters in to harvest some birds and redistribute large flocks away from farmsteads.

Fall 2001 turkey licenses increased to 6,510, up 510 from last year. Three new units were opened and several others have been expanded. We anticipate a successful hunting season.



DUCKS

Hunting ducks over floating decoys has become my passion. Growing up in Devils Lake we typically hunted ducks either in the goose decoys or by jump-shooting potholes. When I moved to Bismarck in the mid-1980s I began to hunt with friends who had mastered the art of scouting just the right spot and then decoying and calling flocks of ducks into range. They exposed me to the excitement and personal satisfaction of shooting ducks over water on your terms in a well-designed decoy spread, with just the right wind and camouflage.

For me the challenge of dealing with the weather makes hunting ducks over decoys interesting and enjoyable. There is just something exciting about checking the weather the night before, hoping for a biting northwest wind to usher in a cold front and overcast skies. The wind direction and speed, temperature, precipitation outlook, and sky conditions all feed into the mental challenge of where to go and

how to set up. Setting decoys in chest deep, choppy, cold, steel-gray water and still being relatively warm and dry in neoprene waders is a great feeling. It gets even better when you have to break ice to set decoys. Hunters are among the few people in our modern world who understand and appreciate the "pleasure" of being out in inclement weather.

The fall flight forecast for ducks in 2001 is great, according to Mike Johnson, migratory game bird supervisor for the Department. May water conditions were up 65 percent from 2000 and the eighth highest since 1948. The May breeding duck index was up 14 percent from 2000, 129 percent above the 1948-2000 average and the second highest on record. All species were above the long-term average and mallards were the highest on record.

This increase in duck numbers was not unexpected considering this is the eighth summer in a row of exceptional water conditions, the number of CRP acres remains



The author pursuing a simple yet satisfying duck hunt on a small North Dakota marsh.

high, and dry conditions exist throughout much of prairie Canada. In addition, this year's brood index was up eight percent from 2000 and 243 percent above the 1955-2000 average. This impressive brood index is second only to the all time high in 1999. In the fall of 2001, the fall flight of ducks from North Dakota (adults plus young) is expected to be the highest on record and up 30 percent from the fall flight of last year.

Duck hunters need to keep in mind the success of our fall duck hunting season is directly related to weather conditions and when freeze-up occurs. Last year, most ducks departed by election day, thereby effectively ending the season after only about five weeks. Another factor to consider is poor habitat conditions and low flight forecast from the prairies of Canada. Locally raised ducks may be the basis for most of our hunting if predictions from Canada hold true.

GEESE

Setting up goose decoys has always been one of my favorite aspects of hunting. Stumbling around in the dark with a billion stars overhead trying to get just the right configuration of full body shells, rags, and wind socks was something special when I was a kid and still is today. Every time I set decoys under a blanket of stars, I can't help but look for and acknowledge the presence of Orion the Hunter. It's as if having the familiar and recognizable constellation of stars over your shoulder will bring success in the impending hunt. After the decoys are set it's time for a cup of hot coffee and quiet conversation while listening and watching for signs of geese on the move.

CANADA GEESSE

The outlook for Canada goose hunting is as good as it gets. In fact, when it comes to resident Canada geese the population has reached a point where it is causing serious problems for some agricultural producers. In order to address this situation the Department instituted a statewide early September season in the fall of 2000, which included an expanded daily bag limit of five birds with 10 in possession. In 22 days hunters killed more than 37,000 large Canada geese in North Dakota. The early September season will be held again this year and based on the continued population growth we anticipate an even higher harvest. The regular season for Canada geese will again feature a three-bird daily limit and six in possession. The lower limit is in place to avoid an elevated harvest on migrating geese that begin arriving in the state at the end of September.

SNOW GEESSE

Most people realize that snow goose hunting in North Dakota is changing. The real question is: will the change be permanent?

About four years ago hunters began to notice a marked change in snow goose migration patterns. The geese began staying in the prairie provinces of Canada for a longer time in the fall and then over flying the state when they did move south. Abundant water, food, and lack of hunting pressure in southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan are suspected causes behind the adjustment in snow goose movement. Correspondingly, snow goose harvest has dropped in North Dakota over the past several years. This is certainly not

the first time that snow geese have altered their migration patterns and none of the previous changes have reversed themselves. There will always be snow geese to hunt in the state but perhaps not in the massive numbers and concentrations we witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s.

SANDHILL CRANES

Sandhill crane populations are stable to slightly increasing and this has allowed some expansion of hunting opportunities in the past few years. Cranes have been entering North Dakota later each fall so we have slowly adjusted the season back to coincide with the migration. This fall, for the first time, the sandhill crane season will be open east of Highway 281.

The Department has been working for years to open this area to hunting. Decades of collecting detailed harvest and technical information resulted in successful negotiations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to open the area.

The season east of 281 will be limited to 37 days and the daily bag limit will be two. The rest of the state will have a 58-day season with a daily bag limit of three birds. Department personnel will continue to measure harvested birds for subspecies composition and will monitor the harvest of large sandhill cranes, which are not as abundant as lesser sandhill cranes.

MOURNING DOVES

Spring surveys show the breeding population of mourning doves has declined in recent years. However, reproduction has remained high and doves are typically plentiful the first few weeks of the season. North Dakota hunters don't harvest many mourning doves compared to hunters in the rest of the country, but interest in the nation's most popular game bird has risen in recent years. Remember that doves migrate out of North Dakota early, depending upon the weather, so it is important to get out early and often during September.

TUNDRA SWANS

Similar to previous years, 2,000 swan licenses are available in 2001 and they were issued by a lottery. Interest in hunting swans remains high and the success rate is stable at around 45-50 percent. The highest harvest counties in North Dakota were (in descending order): Ward, McLean, Kidder, Mountrail, Ramsey, Stutsman, Benson, and Pierce.

Big Game

For me, walking makes big game hunting worthwhile. It doesn't matter if it is marching across prairie, carefully sneaking through woods, plowing through frozen cattail marshes, or scaling buttes and crossing canyons in the badlands; as long as I am walking, I'm happy. Some of my most memorable hunting experiences have come as a result of walking over just one more hill or working through one last draw. Finding those nooks and crannies on a seemingly uninteresting landscape can be rewarding. Sometimes you may get that elusive buck while other times tired legs, sore feet, and instant sleep are the only reward for hiking that extra mile. The willingness to walk also opens doors. Many landowners dislike road hunters. If you park your vehicle and walk and demonstrate to a landowner that all you will leave is footprints, and lots of them, you will more than likely be invited back and be considered someone they would like to have on their property.

With a record number of deer licenses available, hunters will see plenty of animals this fall. Many hunters will have an option to purchase a second license, or even third license.

WHITE-TAILED DEER AND MULE DEER

After several relatively mild winters white-tailed deer and mule deer numbers have increased significantly. Whitetail populations are particularly strong along the Canadian border and in the eastern third of the state. In response, the Game and Fish Department increased deer license numbers 20 percent, from 88,650 last year to 106,350 in 2001. This record number of licenses is intended to reduce the deer population to unit management goals. In many units white-tailed deer are well above management goals and this year's aggressive increase in licenses is designed to adjust the population downward.

There was a corresponding increase in muzzleloader licenses with the total number reaching 2,024, half of which are for antlered whitetails. In addition, the legislature allowed the Department flexibility regarding length of the muzzleloader season and as such we extended it to 16 1/2 days.

Mule deer have responded to milder winters and a dramatic reduction in doe harvest instituted several years ago. The population in western North Dakota has

recovered nicely. The 5,150 licenses issued in 2001 is an increase of 1,500 from 2000.

PRONGHORN

North Dakota's pronghorn population was slowly recovering from the catastrophic winter of 1996-1997 when the state lost 75 percent of its animals. We had high hopes the population would show continued increase in 2001; however, overall reproduction was significantly lower than anticipated throughout much of the state's pronghorn range. This was especially true in the northern badlands and Missouri Slope areas of western North Dakota. Why reproduction was so low remains unknown. Our big game biologists will be working on this issue in the coming months and will closely monitor pronghorn harvest and next year's reproduction. As a result of the disappointing reproductive effort the number of licenses available for the gun season was reduced and no additional units were opened to hunting for fall 2001. The 1,155 licenses available is a reduction of 145 from last year.

MOOSE, ELK AND BIGHORN SHEEP

The once-in-a-lifetime big game trio of moose, elk, and bighorn sheep continue to generate a tremendous amount of interest among our state's hunters. The excitement is similar to that of a powerball lottery with everyone who applies believing that this just might be their year. Those fortunate few who did beat the odds already know who they are and we hope are well on their way to planning their hunt. With statewide elk and moose populations remaining stable the number of licenses is nearly equal that of last year. There are 195 elk and 135 moose licenses available for 2001.

Four bighorn sheep licenses (three via the lottery and one auction) were issued in the northern badlands for this fall. The northern population is stable and comprised of at least 135 sheep including 43 adult rams. No licenses were issued for the southern badlands because of a dramatic population decline resulting from a die off in 1998. The Department began the process of reestablishing a viable population in the southern badlands last winter by moving nine sheep from southeast of Watford City to the Bullion Butte area. Hunter success for bighorn rams has been over 90 percent since the first season in 1975.





FURBEARERS

Hunting fox and coyotes and trapping muskrats, beaver, and mink on a frozen landscape are activities that people get in their blood. I have only done it a few times and can understand how competing with the harsh winter conditions and "out foxing" a fox or wily coyote can be enjoyable. The skill and dedication of true fur hunters and trappers is incredible.

What sticks in my mind about the few times I have been out is the cold, crisp

One of the few disappointments in the fall outlook, pronghorn numbers are down this year and the number of licenses available was reduced.

air. It is clean, clear, and raw – almost primeval in a way.

The recent mange outbreak and low fur prices are still depressing terrestrial furbearer populations and people's interest in hunting and trapping. The die-hard hunters and trappers are still at it but many weekend warriors have drifted away. When populations begin to recover

and prices rise, we believe people will come back to fur-based recreation.

On the positive side, water-based species such as mink, muskrat and beaver are doing well, but prices are low. Still, people continue to trap and hunt these species because they value the simple joys of being outdoors doing something they cherish.

CONCLUSION

Autumn 2001 appears to have all the ingredients for a successful season. As individual hunters it's up to each of us to make it the best and safest it can be. Remember to slow down and enjoy the simple things that make hunting such an important part of our lives. Simple things like frozen Snicker Bars, sitting around the campfire with friends on a starry night, your dog's first blind retrieve, the feel of a good pair of broken-in boots, hiking back to the vehicle with a game vest heavy with roosters, the smell of gunpowder in the air, the sound of a duck call, the snort of an alert antelope, the sound of flushing wings, the cold bite of a northwest wind on your face....

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In some areas of the state, white-tailed deer numbers are above management goals. The Department needs a good harvest in those areas to reduce the potential for winter hardship.

